THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
With Countless Gifts of Love

November 28, 1996
John M. Buchanan

Is it not by his high superfluousness we know
Our God? For to equal a need
Is natural, animal, mineral: but to fling
Rainbows over the sun
And beauty above the moon, and secret rainbows
On the domes of deep sea-shells,
And make the necessary embrace of breeding
Beautiful also as fire,
Not even the weeds to multiply without blossom
Nor the birds without music:
There is the great humaneness at the heart of things,
The extravagant kindness, the fountain
Humanity can understand, and would flow likewise
If power and desire were perch-mates.

The Excesses of God
Robinson Jeffers

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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WITH COUNTLESS GIFTS OF LOVE

NOVEMBER 28, 1996
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, CHICAGO
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
SCRIPTURE
Deuteronomy 8:7-18
Luke 17:11-19

One of the most remarkable liturgical acts I have ever witnessed occurred last Wednesday at the Funeral Mass for Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. As one of the 25 ecumenical guests, I had the great honor of being part of the solemn processional and of sitting on the chancel just to the side of the high altar. You saw television coverage, perhaps, or pictures in the newspaper. It was an altogether remarkable occasion for the way it clearly touched something deep and fundamental and important in the heart of our city – and beyond. There was something about Cardinal Bernardin that communicated the basic, essential values of Christian faith to the world in a way that was uncharacteristically inclusive and gracious. It was that, finally, I conclude, that we loved about him – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Christian, believer, non-believer. He simply showed us a better way to be human. When he forgave his accuser he simply showed the world an example of the love St. Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13, the love that Jesus expressed on the cross when he forgave his own executioners. When he simply refused to condemn, exclude or even criticize his own critics on the left and right – conservative Catholics who thought he was far too liberal, liberal Catholics who thought he was far too conservative – he showed the world something stunningly authentic and good and true.

And so, the city stopped for almost an entire week, and for a day on Wednesday, paused to remember and honor. It was impressive. Vice President and Mrs. Gore were there. Governor and Mrs. Edgar, Mayor and Mrs. Daley. The influential and powerful and important leaders of the city and the Roman Catholic Church were there. The Cathedral itself was gorgeous, the music wonderful. The homily was delivered by Monsignor Father Kenneth Velo, Cardinal Bernardin's long-time friend and assistant, who introduced himself to the congregation of dignitaries in the way he was known to Cardinal Bernardin's mother, as "the regular driver." It was a spirited and warm and eloquent and sometimes very funny and altogether human address. And as he concluded with a touchingly personal word – "Cardinal, eminence. You're home. You're home." The most remarkable liturgical act I have ever witnessed and participated in occurred. It wasn't listed in the program. I don't think anybody – even with the exquisitely and detailed planning that obviously had taken place – anticipated it. Father Velo sat down. There was a moment of empty silence. And then, someone started to applaud. Instantly everybody joined. And then everybody stood. The people in the pews – first, and at last, the hierarchy, the bishops and archbishops and cardinals and papal nuncios – who, because they were seated behind the high altar were actually facing the congregation and could see it themselves. This wasn't in the liturgical program. It began appropriately, in the back and finally they, too, stood to engage in this unscheduled and remarkable liturgical act – a standing ovation. It was vigorous. It was good and right and appropriate. It was a way everyone could express what he or she was feeling: gratitude for the life – and for the remarkable dying – of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin.

Thanksgiving. It is at once the simplest, but also the most important, most fundamental religious emotion. I love something the late Henri Nouwen once wrote in a journal he kept while traveling and working in South America. The entry for November 26 reads:

> Thanksgiving Day! There is probably no day I liked so much in the United States as this day. In many ways it struck me as a more spiritual or religious day than Christmas: no commercial preparation, just a coming together to express gratitude for life and for all the blessings we have received. I am more and more convinced that gratitude is one of the most sublime of human emotions. [*Gracias,* p. 55]

At the very heart of the biblical witness is the affirmation of God's goodness. God is good, not threatening or intimidating. God's creation is also good, not bad, not even neutral. And so, the basic human response to God is not fear, terror, or even ethical obligation. It is thanksgiving.

Religion in the Bible is first of all joyful praise. In the passage from the Book of Deuteronomy which we heard this morning, the religion of Israel is actually undergoing a profound change from rules and regulations to a reminder to be thankful for the land and for food. The faith of Israel is here exhibiting the first important signs of becoming a religion of gratitude, not solely of demand.

That is a critical point. Religion often seems like a system of rules governing personal behavior. But biblical religion is first and fundamentally an expression of gladness and gratitude to God for the good land, for the miracle of life itself. Karl Barth once wrote "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo."

Well, I don't presume to argue with Karl Barth much, but I'm not sure that grace always evokes gratitude. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes grace is just plain ignored. Sometimes human beings are ungrateful. Sometimes we get it into our heads that we deserve what we have – that the world owes us a living.

My parents weren't willing to trust the assumption that gratitude follows grace. They regarded gratitude as a duty. They drilled gratitude into me. They taught me to say "thank you." They insisted that I call my grandmother and thank her for birthday cards – even ones with no money in them. They insisted that I write thank you notes. Till the day she died, my mother was still nagging me about writing thank you notes.

And I now know that they were teaching me basic biblical religion: that we busy, preoccupied, sometimes self-centered human beings need to be reminded not so much to fulfill God's ethical expectations by writing a requisite number of thank you notes ; but that we need to be thankful in order to be fully human; that we miss something important and essential and beautiful if we do not learn and cultivate the practice, the habit, the attitude of thanksgiving.

God wants us to be grateful, not for God's sake, not because God particularly needs our gratitude, but for our own sake. That's the point of the story in the Gospel of Luke that we read every year on Thanksgiving. Jesus encounters a pathetic band of people suffering from leprosy.

Their disease isolated them totally from society, synagogue, even family. Nobody was allowed to have contact with them. If they didn't die from their disease, which they rarely did, they died of hunger, exposure, or, because of their isolation, they went mad.

Jesus encountered a group of ten of them, a pathetic colony of suffering. From the prescribed distance, they called out, "Jesus, have mercy!" My guess is they were asking for money for food. What follows is fascinating. Jesus sends them off to see a priest. On the way, they are cleansed. One of the ten returns to find Jesus and falls on his face, thanking him.

Jesus sounds like my mother when he wonders out loud about the other nine and then says to the man, "Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well."

The point of this story, I think, is not Jesus' power to cure leprosy. The point is that the man may be clean, but he isn't well, until he expresses gratitude. That's the point. Wholeness and healing are not merely absence of disease – they are the presence of gratitude. God, I believe, simply wants us to pay attention to the grace all around us.

John Updike wrote in an essay one time:

> Ancient religion and modern science agree. We are here to give praise. Or to slightly tip the expression, to pay attention ... What we beyond doubt do have is our instinctive intellectual curiosity about the universe from the quasars down to the quarks, our wonder at existence itself and an occasional surge of sheer blind gratitude for being here. [*Odd Jobs*, p. 869]

Does it happen to you, a "surge of sheer blind gratitude for being here?" It does to me when I walk on the beach in the early gray light, or when I carry my first steaming cup of coffee to the window and watch the sun come up, or when the soft colors of late afternoon appear on the lake horizon, or when the first snow of November falls -- a "surge of sheer blind gratitude" – for the beauty of the choir's anthem, the steady loyalty of friends, the embrace, the touch, the squeeze of a hand, sheer gratitude for being here to say "hello" to my new grandson one hour after his birth.

Sometimes it takes a reminder to evoke gratitude. Sometimes the reminder comes in the form of an encounter with our mortality. I use for my daily devotional a little journal called *Daybook*, created and edited by a couple I have never met, Marv and Nancy Hiles. Marv had a heart attack and emergency open heart surgery and occasionally he writes about it. Recently, he remembered his return from the hospital.

> The first two days at home I could not sleep for joy, for the overpowering quiet of the room, a vase of roses, a propped-up picture book of Monet's *Giverney* and the high musical wind in the dry autumn grass outside.

He recalls taking his first walk outside on a bright October day.

> I was captured with one thought – all I have to do is be here. This is it. I was overwhelmed to walk with Nancy on the deck forever, to pass the rose, feel its redness and then go into the house and write and phone someone I cared about and tell them I loved them. What more could there be? [*Daybook*, Autumn 1996]

I still need a reminder now and then to pay attention, don't you? Life is so busy; we are in such a hurry most of the time that moments of grace go by unnoticed, uncelebrated. Gratitude goes by unexpressed and therefore unexperienced. And so I am thankful for Thanksgiving. For the uncomplicated reminder to pay attention and say "thank you."

I miss my mother's reminders to write the requisite thank you notes, the insistence on expressing gratitude as a way to experience the deep satisfaction of being grateful. It's no coincidence I suppose, that her favorite poem was Edna St. Vincent Millay's "God's World."

> World, I cannot hold thee close enough!
> Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
> Thy mists that roll and rise! ...
> Lord, I do fear
> Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year.

We are not a particularly pious family, but she insisted that we go to church on Thanksgiving Eve. And so, from my earliest childhood through college, I was dragged to one community Thanksgiving service after another. Community Thanksgiving services are not liturgical things of beauty, by the way. We often do them ecumenically because no individual church can muster a crowd large enough on Wednesday evening to warrant turning the lights on. The preaching was always forgettable, I recall, the anthems bravely sung by a faithful few who didn't have anything better to do the night before Thanksgiving and could be persuaded to sing. None of that mattered to her. "Why," I asked her, "why in the world do you make us go to these things? Why can't we stay home and be thankful watching television like everybody else?" "It's the music," she said. "You get to sing the Thanksgiving hymns. They're the best in the book."

She was right, of course. They are the best. They gather up the essence of our faith, the goodness of God, the goodness of life, the miracle of our being here.

> Now thank we all our God
> With heart and hand and voices
> Who wondrous things hath done
> In whom this world rejoices.
> Who from our mother's arms
> Hath blessed us on our way
> With countless gifts of love
> And still is ours today.
>
> Amen.